

NRHA Report AHMAC National Rural Health Sub-Committee

June 2002

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**Report to
Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council
National Rural Health Policy Sub-Committee**

Sydney, June 2002

Thank you for the opportunity to meet again with the Rural Sub-committee.

1. Royal Flying Doctor Service

Barbara Ryan, National Health Program Manager with the Australian Council of the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS), will report on developments with the RFDS's national communications strategy.

2. 7th National Rural Health Conference

As members of the Rural Sub-committee will know, the 7th Conference is in Hobart from 1-4 March 2003. This time around it begins on the Saturday and ends on the Tuesday evening.

The theme is The Art and Science of Healthy Community: Sharing country know-how. The intention is to consciously expand the rural and remote health community by involving the widest definition of health and its determinants, and to make special efforts to encourage attendance from non-health sectors.

There will be scientific papers in the Infront Outback stream and papers encouraged from community representatives and others for whom research method and research points are less important. Special support will be provided to first-time paper givers.

The initial closing date for abstracts is Friday 14 June.

There will be a strong Arts-in-health stream for which financial assistance has been sought from the Australia Council.

Keynote speakers have not yet been approached. The three main days of the Conference will be shaped around clustered themes. On Sunday 2 March it is 'Community Place'. On Monday it is 'Community Voice', and on Tuesday 'Community Know-how'. This last connotes the fact that we are interested in whatever works best for health in rural and remote health communities. In some cases there is a robust and quantitative evidence base for best practice, while in others the evidence, such as it is, consists of perceptions of success and perceived outcomes.

The Alliance has assembled a highly motivated and well-qualified team to manage the Conference. It is led by Lyn Eiszele who is Conference Manager and a full-time member of staff and who is supported by Kate Henley, also a full-timer with the Alliance. The team's other members include a number of specialists employed as consultants to the conference such as Sue George (Arts Co-ordinator), Frank Meany (Technical and Audio Visual Manager), Leigh Cupitt (Indigenous Paper Facilitator), Marilyn Chalkley and Elizabeth Bennett (Media), Debbie Phillips (Papers Editor), Lesley Fitzpatrick (Convenor of Infront Outback), Jim Groves (Webmaster), Irene Mills (Chair of friends of the Alliance) and Raylene Foster (representing the Tasmanian Aboriginal Council). The Conference Organising Committee also includes a number of Members of Council of the Alliance.

We are expecting a Conference that might be a little smaller than in Adelaide and Canberra, but which will still be a key event for rural and remote health, innovative and exciting. There has been criticism in the past that the quality of the Conference

itself has not been matched by the quality of follow-up, including the development and utilisation of recommendations. The Conference Organising Committee is putting substantial effort into ways in which follow-up from the 7th can be enhanced and sustained.

3. Action on Nursing in Rural and Remote Areas

This is an initiative of the Australian Nursing Federation, the Association for Australian Rural Nurses, the Council of Remote Area Nurses of Australia, the Australian Council of Deans of Nursing, the Australian Nursing Council Inc, the Congress of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nurses and the Royal College of Nursing Australia. The Chief Nursing Officers are also formally represented on the Project Committee and have been kept closely informed.

As you will all be aware, the shape of this important project has been changed substantially. "Action on Nursing in Rural and Remote Areas" now has an eighteen month timeline. There are three draft papers out for public consultation and comment, including a detailed issues paper and a draft set of recommendations. The Project Organising Committee expects to hear formally from each State and Territory jurisdiction about these draft papers.

Due in large part to the recommendations from AHMAC and AHWOC, the Summit initially proposed for Adelaide in July has been cancelled. The Project will take on board the findings of the National Inquiry into Nursing Education and the final report of the Senate's Inquiry into Nursing. There will be a national Forum in Canberra, currently scheduled for mid-October 2002.

The Project Organising Committee has had positive feedback from most of the States and from the Northern Territory and looks forward to the attendance of relevant people at the Forum.

4. NRHA funding

The Alliance is currently completing its negotiations with the Office of Rural Health in the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing for funding for the triennium beginning 1 July 2002.

Since its establishment ten years ago the Alliance has received regular support from that Department, without which it simply would not have existed. Because it is comprised of national organisations, the Alliance has tended to focus on national issues as distinct from State or regional ones. This emphasis has been confirmed by the reality of the Alliance's financial support.

However the reality of working for better health status in rural and remote areas means that the organisation has to be involved with State, regional and local issues. With additional support from State and Territory governments it would be possible for the Alliance to be more closely involved with issues at that level. However it is hard to break the cycle by finding the means to work on State issues while resourced only for national activities. It may one day be possible to break this cycle, for which the trust and confidence of the States would be a pre-requisite. It would be possible to develop an agenda for State and Territory issues in just the same as way the Alliance currently has an agenda of national issues.

5. Alliances in rural education and for rural women

The NRHA is involved with a number of important initiatives which have the capacity to enhance the strength and sustainability of 'the rural and remote voice' in Australia. The Isolated Children's Parents' Association (a Member Body of the Alliance) and the National Farmers' Federation have been leading work for over a year on the establishment of the Rural Education Forum of Australia (REFA). Three roundtables have been held and REFA now has real prospects of securing modest financial support for a secretariat from the Department of Education, Science and Training. The NRHA is a founding member of REFA. Much of the work will continue to be done by the 30-35 organisations that have been involved to date through their coming together in additional roundtables; the staffer to be appointed would act mainly in a support role to these meetings and to this type of work.

Similarly, the Country Women's Association of Australia (also a Member Body) has been working with the Foundation for Australian Agricultural Women, Australian Women in Agriculture, the ICPA, the NRHA, Women in Seafood and the Local Government Women's Association. The result is the National Rural Women's Coalition which has obtained support from the Office of Status of Women. Negotiations are in train for this new Coalition to co-locate its staffer with the NRHA in Canberra.

Members of the Rural Sub-committee will be pleased to know that the Office of Rural Health has provided support for a new Rural and Remote Allied Health Advisory Service. This is being auspiced by Services for Australian Rural and Remote Allied Health and the Australian Rural and Remote Allied Health Taskforce. This has the exciting prospect of beginning very soon to place rural and remote allied health on the map for the first time. The work to be undertaken will include some of the fundamental building blocks, such as an agreed definition of 'allied health', establishing communication networks, providing representation for allied health professionals and developing a database on the current distribution of allied health professionals in rural and remote areas. This work will undoubtedly assist the Rural Sub-committee in its indicated activities related to allied health.

Finally, the Office of Rural Health has also provided some secretariat support for the Association for Australian Rural Nurses (AARN). AARN has to date had only voluntary capacity to maintain and develop its organisation and its work.

These very positive decisions have the capacity to inform and support the policy development work of the Rural Sub-committee and its constituent members. They will also certainly impact on the operation of the NRHA.

6. Other key activities

The Alliance has obviously been a keen observer of developments in medical indemnity. It is working on discussion papers on 'Medicare in the Bush', mental health, Indigenous health and the place of scholarships in a total suite of policies on recruitment and retention. The Alliance is working hard on its external communications systems, including for PARTYline and on-line access. Professor John Marley has been appointed Editor of the Australian Journal of Rural Health to succeed the founding Editor, Professor Desley Hegney. The Alliance will continue to be national management agency for the RAMUS scheme, while administration of the JFSS will pass on 1 July to a consortium headed by the Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine. The Alliance is represented on a number of review committees and enquiries, including those related to HealthConnect and work of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare on a framework for rural and remote health data and specific health status.

Gordon Gregory
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